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Chapter 25

BENTLEY DRUMMLE, who was so sulky a fellow that he even took up a book as if its writer had done him an injury, did not take up an acquaintance in a more agreeable spirit. Heavy in figure, movement, and comprehension -- in the sluggish complexion of his face, and in the large awkward tongue that seemed to loll about in his mouth as he himself lolled about in a room -- he was idle, proud, niggardly, reserved, and suspicious. He came of rich people down in Somersetshire, who had nursed this combination of qualities until they made the discovery that it was just of age and a blockhead. Thus, Bentley Drummle had come to Mr Pocket when he was a head taller than that gentleman, and half a dozen heads thicker than most gentlemen.

Startop had been spoilt by a weak mother and kept at home when he ought to have been at school, but he was devotedly attached to her, and admired her beyond measure. He had a woman's delicacy of feature, and was -- "as you may see, though you never saw her," said Herbert to me -- exactly like his mother. It was but natural that I should take to him much more kindly than to Drummle, and that, even in the earliest evenings of our boating, he and I should pull homeward abreast of one another, conversing from boat to boat, while Bentley Drummle came up in our wake alone, under the overhanging banks and among the rushes. He would always creep in-shore like some uncomfortable amphibious creature, even when the tide would have sent him fast upon his way; and I always think of him as coming after us in the dark or by the back-water, when our own two boats were breaking the sunset or the moonlight in mid-stream.

Herbert was my intimate companion and friend. I presented him with a half-share in my boat, which was the occasion of his often coming down to Hammersmith; and my possession of a half-share in his chambers often took me up to London. We used to walk between the two places at all hours. I have an affection for the road yet (though it is not so pleasant a road as it was then), formed in the impressibility of untried youth and hope.

When I had been in Mr Pocket's family a month or two, Mr and Mrs Camilla turned up. Camilla was Mr Pocket's sister. Georgiana, whom I had seen at Miss Havisham's on the same occasion, also turned up. She was a cousin -- an indigestive single woman, who called her rigidity religion, and her liver love. These people hated me with the hatred of cupidity and disappointment. As a matter of course, they fawned upon me in my prosperity with the basest meanness. Towards Mr Pocket, as a grown-up infant with no notion of his own interests, they showed the complacent forbearance I had heard them express. Mrs Pocket they held in contempt; but they allowed the poor soul to have been heavily disappointed in life, because that shed a feeble reflected light upon themselves.

These were the surroundings among which I settled down, and applied myself to my education. I soon contracted expensive habits, and began to spend an amount of money that within a few short months I should have thought almost fabulous; but through good and evil I stuck to my books. There was no other merit in this, than my having sense enough to feel my deficiencies. Between Mr Pocket and Herbert I got on fast; and, with one or the other always at my elbow to give me the start I wanted, and clear obstructions out of my road, I must have been as great a dolt as Drummle if I had done less.

I had not seen Mr Wemmick for some weeks, when I thought I would write him a note and propose to go home with him on a certain evening. He replied that it would give him much pleasure, and that he would expect me at the office at six o'clock. Thither I went, and there I found him, putting the key of his safe down his back as the clock struck.

"Did you think of walking down to Walworth?" said he.

"Certainly," said I, "if you approve."

"Very much," was Wemmick's reply, "for I have had my legs under the desk all day, and shall be glad to stretch them. Now I'll tell you what I have got for supper, Mr Pip. I have got a stewed steak -- which is of home preparation -- and a cold roast fowl -- which is from the cook's-shop. I think it's tender, because the master of the shop was a Juryman in some cases of ours the other day, and we let him down easy. I reminded him of it when I bought the fowl, and I said, "Pick us out a good one, old Briton, because if we had chosen to keep you in the box another day or two, we could easily have done it." He said to that, "Let me make you a present of the best fowl in the shop." I let him, of course. As far as it goes, it's property and portable. You don't object to an aged parent, I hope?"

I really thought he was still speaking of the fowl, until he added, "Because I have got an aged parent at my place." I then said what politeness required.

"So, you haven't dined with Mr Jaggers yet?" he pursued, as we walked along.

"Not yet."

"He told me so this afternoon when he heard you were coming. I expect you'll have an invitation to-morrow. He's going to ask your pals, too. Three of 'em; ain't there?"

Although I was not in the habit of counting Drummle as one of my intimate associates, I answered, "Yes."

"Well, he's going to ask the whole gang;" I hardly felt complimented by the word; "and whatever he gives you, he'll give you good. Don't look forward to variety, but you'll have excellence. And there's another tum thing in his house," proceeded Wemmick, after a moment's pause, as if the remark followed on the house-keeper understood; "he never lets a door or window be fastened at night."

"Is he never robbed?"

"That's it!" returned Wemmick. "He says, and gives it out publicly, "I want to see the man who'll rob *me*." Lord bless you, I have heard him, a hundred times if I have heard him once, say to regular cracksmen in our front office, "You know where I live; now, no bolt is ever drawn there; why don't you do a stroke of business with me? Come; can't I tempt you?" Not a man of them, sir, would be bold enough to try it on, for love or money."

"They dread him so much?" said I.

"Dread him," said Wemmick. "I believe you they dread him. Not but what he's artful, even in his defiance of them. No silver, sir. Britannia metal, every spoon."

‘So they wouldn’t have much,’ I observed, ‘even if they --’

‘Ah! But *he* would have much,’ said Wemmick, cutting me short, ‘and they know it. He’d have their lives, and the lives of scores of ‘em. He’d have all he could get. And it’s impossible to say what he couldn’t get, if he gave his mind to it.’

I was falling into meditation on my guardian’s greatness, when Wemmick remarked:

‘As to the absence of plate, that’s only his natural depth, you know. A river’s its natural depth, and he’s his natural depth. Look at his watch-chain. That’s real enough.’

‘It’s very massive,’ said I.

‘Massive?’ repeated Wemmick. ‘I think so. And his watch is a gold repeater, and worth a hundred pound if it’s worth a penny. Mr Pip, there are about seven hundred thieves in this town who know all about that watch; there’s not a man, a woman, or a child, among them, who wouldn’t identify the smallest link in that chain, and drop it as if it was red-hot, if inveigled into touching it.’

At first with such discourse, and afterwards with conversation of a more general nature, did Mr Wemmick and I beguile the time and the road, until he gave me to understand that we had arrived in the district of Walworth.

It appeared to be a collection of back lanes, ditches, and little gardens, and to present the aspect of a rather dull retirement. Wemmick’s house was a little wooden cottage in the midst of plots of garden, and the top of it was cut out and painted like a battery mounted with guns.

‘My own doing,’ said Wemmick. ‘Looks pretty; don’t it?’

I highly commended it. I think it was the smallest house I ever saw; with the queerest gothic windows (by far the greater part of them sham), and a gothic door, almost too small to get in at.

‘That’s a real flagstaff, you see,’ said Wemmick, ‘and on Sundays I run up a real flag. Then look here. After I have crossed this bridge, I hoist it up -- so -- and cut off the communication.’

The bridge was a plank, and it crossed a chasm about four feet wide and two deep. But it was very pleasant to see the pride with which he hoisted it up and made it fast; smiling as he did so, with a relish and not merely mechanically.

‘At nine o’clock every night, Greenwich time,’ said Wemmick, ‘the gun fires. There he is, you see! And when you hear him go, I think you’ll say he’s a Stinger.’

The piece of ordnance referred to, was mounted in a separate fortress, constructed of lattice-work. It was protected from the weather by an ingenious little tarpaulin contrivance in the nature of an umbrella.

‘Then, at the back,’ said Wemmick, ‘out of sight, so as not to impede the idea of fortifications -- for it’s a principle with me, if you have an idea, carry it out and keep it up -- I don’t know whether that’s your opinion --’

I said, decidedly.

‘-- At the back, there’s a pig, and there are fowls and rabbits; then, I knock together my own little frame, you see, and grow cucum- bers; and you’ll judge at supper what sort of a salad I can raise. So, sir,’ said Wemmick, smiling again, but seriously too, as he shook his head, ‘if you can suppose the little place besieged, it would hold out a devil of a time in point of provisions.’

Then, he conducted me to a bower about a dozen yards off, but which was approached by such ingenious twists of path that it took quite a long time to get at; and in this retreat our glasses were already set forth. Our punch was cooling in an ornamental lake on whose margin the bower was raised. This piece of water (with an island in the middle which might have been the salad for supper) was of a circular form, and he had constructed a fountain in it, which, when you set a little mill going and took a cork out of a pipe, played to that powerful extent that it made the back of your hand quite wet.

‘I am my own engineer, and my own carpenter, and my own plumber, and my own gardener, and my own Jack of all Trades,’ said Wemmick, in acknowledging my compliments. ‘Well; it’s a good thing, you know. It brushes the Newgate cobwebs away, and pleases the Aged. You wouldn’t mind being at once introduced to the Aged, would you? It wouldn’t put you out?’

I expressed the readiness I felt, and we went into the castle. There, we found, sitting by a fire, a very old man in a flannel coat: clean, cheerful, comfortable, and well cared for, but intensely deaf.

‘Well aged parent,’ said Wemmick, shaking hands with him in a cordial and jocose way, ‘how am you?’

‘All right, John; all right!’ replied the old man.

‘Here’s Mr Pip, aged parent,’ said Wemmick, ‘and I wish you could hear his name. Nod away at him, Mr Pip; that’s what he likes. Nod away at him, if you please, like winking!’

‘This is a fine place of my son’s, sir,’ cried the old man, while I nodded as hard as I possibly could. ‘This is a pretty pleasure- ground, sir. This spot and these beautiful works upon it ought to be kept together by the Nation, after my son’s time, for the people’s enjoyment.’

‘You’re as proud of it as Punch; ain’t you, Aged?’ said Wem- mick, contemplating the old man, with his hard face really softened; ‘*there’s* a nod for you;’ giving him a tremendous one; ‘*there’s* another for you;’ giving him a still more tremendous one; ‘you like that, don’t you? If you’re not tired, Mr Pip -- though I know it’s tiring to strangers-- will you tip him one more? You can’t think how it pleases him.’

I tipped him several more, and he was in great spirits. We left him bestirring himself to feed the fowls, and we sat down to our punch in the arbour; where Wemmick told me as he smoked a pipe that it had taken him a good many years to bring the property up to its present pitch of perfection.

‘Is it your own, Mr Wemmick?’

‘O yes ’ said Wemmick, ‘I have got hold of it, a bit at a time. It’s a freehold, by George!’

`Is it, indeed? I hope Mr Jaggars admires it?'

`Never seen it,' said Wemmick. `Never heard of it. Never seen the Aged. Never heard of him. No; the office is one thing, and private life is another. When I go into the office, I leave the Castle behind me, and when I come into the Castle, I leave the office behind me. If it's not in any way disagreeable to you, you'll oblige me by doing the same. I don't wish it professionally spoken about.'

Of course I felt my good faith involved in the observance of his request. The punch being very nice, we sat there drinking it and talking, until it was almost nine o'clock. `Getting near gun-fire,' said Wemmick then, as he laid down his pipe; `it's the Aged's treat.'

Proceeding into the Castle again, we found the Aged heating the poker, with expectant eyes, as a preliminary to the performance of this great nightly ceremony. Wemmick stood with his watch in his hand, until the moment was come for him to take the red-hot poker from the Aged, and repair to the battery. He took it, and went out, and presently the Stinger went off with a Bang that shook the crazy little box of a cottage as if it must fall to pieces, and made every glass and teacup in it ring. Upon this, the Aged -- who I believe would have been blown out of his arm-chair but for holding on by the elbows -- cried out exultingly, `He's fired! I heard him!' and I nodded at the old gentleman until it is no figure of speech to declare that I absolutely could not see him.

The interval between that time and supper, Wemmick devoted to showing me his collection of curiosities. They were mostly of a felonious character; comprising the pen with which a celebrated forgery had been committed, a distinguished razor or two, some locks of hair, and several manuscript confessions written under condemnation -- upon which Mr Wemmick set particular value as being, to use his own words, `every one of 'em Lies, sir.' These were agreeably dispersed among small specimens of china and glass various neat trifles made by the proprietor of the museum, and some tobacco-stoppers carved by the Aged. They were all displayed in that chamber of the Castle into which I had been first inducted, and which served, not only as the general sitting-room but as the kitchen too, if I might judge from a saucepan on the hob, and a brazen bijou over the fireplace designed for the suspension of a roasting-jack.

There was a neat little girl in attendance, who looked after the Aged in the day. When she had laid the supper-cloth, the bridge was lowered to give her means of egress, and she withdrew for the night. The supper was excellent; and though the Castle was rather subject to dry-rot insomuch that it tasted like a bad nut, and though the pig might have been farther off, I was heartily pleased with my whole entertainment. Nor was there any drawback on my little turret bedroom, beyond there being such a very thin ceiling between me and the flagstaff, that when I lay down on my back in bed, it seemed as if I had to balance that pole on my forehead all night.

Wemmick was up early in the morning, and I am afraid I heard him cleaning my boots. After that, he fell to gardening, and I saw him from my gothic window pretending to employ the Aged, and nodding at him in a most devoted manner. Our breakfast was as good as the supper, and at half-past eight precisely we started for Little Britain. By degrees, Wemmick got dryer and harder as we went along, and his mouth tightened into a post-office again. At last, when we got to his place of business and he pulled out his key from his coat-collar, he looked as unconscious of his Walworth property as if the Castle and the drawbridge and the arbour and the lake and the fountain and the Aged, had all been blown into space together by the last discharge of the Stinger.